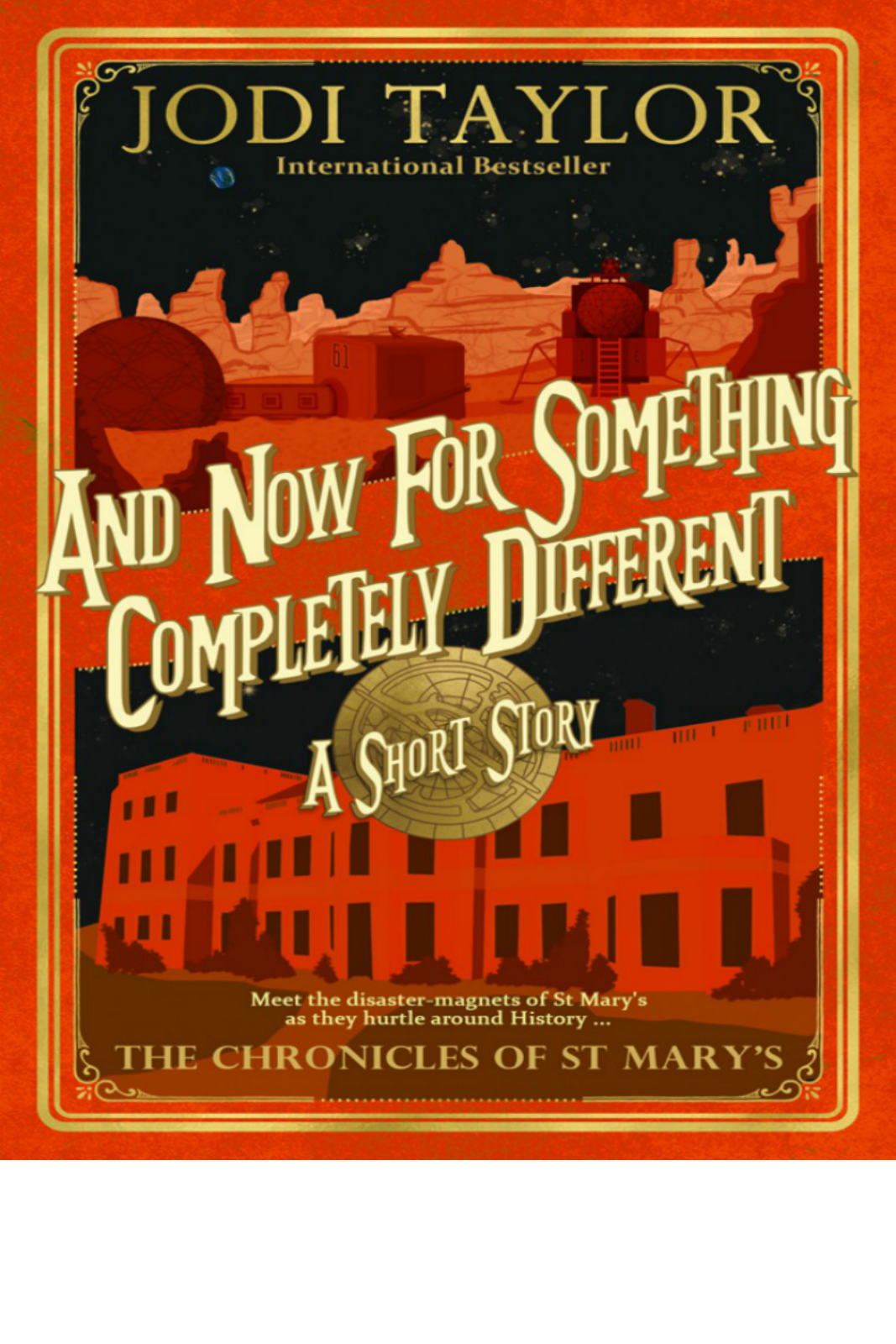




JODI TAYLOR

International Bestseller

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING
COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

A SHORT STORY

Meet the disaster-magnets of St Mary's
as they hurtle around History ...

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S

And Now For Something Completely Different

A short story from The Chronicles of St
Mary's

(without a great deal of Christmas content – but by all means wear a
paper hat when reading)

Jodi Taylor

Dramatis Thingummy

~~Comander~~ **Comander** ~~Idley~~ of the Time Police. Rational, sensible, moderately benign – by Time Police standards, anyway – and currently dealing with the latest St Mary’s-related trauma.

~~Chief~~ **Chief** ~~Paljenden~~ A nice boy. The still centre of the storm. Peacekeeper. Thwarted astronaut.

~~Director~~ **Director** ~~Widely~~ ~~her~~ ~~claimed~~ engineering genius. Innovator and pioneer – according to St Mary’s. Troublemaker and a menace to civilisation as a whole – according to the Time Police.

~~Chief~~ **Chief** ~~Rice~~ Chief Technical Officer at St Mary’s.

~~Miss~~ **Miss** ~~Bird~~ ~~de~~ ~~oughs~~.

~~Dr Peterson~~ **Dr Peterson** Director of St Mary’s. Not the St Mary’s of this story – an earlier one.

~~Dr Maxwell~~ **Dr Maxwell** of the History Department at St Mary’s. Not the St Mary’s of this story – etc.

Both of them enthusiastic participants in a heinous crime.

Or boldly going where no one has gone before*. You choose.

~~First Officer~~ **First Officer** ~~Lewis~~ should have looked where he was going, shouldn’t he?

*The split infinitive ‘To boldly go ...’ has been removed at the insistence of Dr Peterson who gets very upset about this sort of thing. Don’t get him started on apostrophe’s.

Author's note

I thought up most of this story some years ago. The jump to Mars was going to be in the first book, *Just One Damned Thing After Another*, because it dawned on me very early on that if St Mary's were able to jump to say, Albania 1214 – in other words to move through time and space – then it would be perfectly possible for them to kick time into touch for once and have an adventure in space instead.

The Mars episode didn't make it into the finished book but I always had plans for it, so I slipped a tiny mention into *A Symphony of Echoes*. This was the research Pinkie was so desperate to hide from Clive Ronan, and which Max found concealed in a fire bucket.

I've tried to incorporate the Mars Project into various stories but it just wouldn't fit so in the end I decided to give it a story all to itself, not least because I worry the Mars landings won't happen in my lifetime. When the moon landings occurred, I remember being glued to the TV, listening to scientists enthusing about the possibilities ahead of us. I can remember one man ending his interview with the words, 'I can conceive of no more exciting time to be born,' and neither could I.

Sadly, for one reason or another – and, to be fair, some of them were good reasons – manned space exploration just fizzled out. NASA pursued other goals and nothing happened for a very long time.

Now it seems the Mars landings might be less than twenty years away – prompting a lot of anxious counting on my fingers as I try to work out whether I'm likely to live that long. The best I could come up with was that I probably would but possibly wouldn't. I'm now far too old to achieve my goal of being an astronaut – Elon Musk is unlikely to come hammering on my door – and so it seemed obvious that if I wanted to have anything to do with the Big Adventure of Mars then I was going to have to do it for myself.

I cannot emphasise enough that this story is not supposed to be taken seriously, people. I really don't want to be held responsible for massively fibrillating physicists. Or be spat on by outraged science-fiction aficionados for whom the SF genre is not to be taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly. It's just an interesting possibility, isn't it? Theoretically, if St Mary's can jump anywhere in time and space, then surely it's only a matter of calculating the coordinates. And tweaking your pod, of course.

Anyway, this is the story of how St Mary's would do it. Always supposing it gets past my editor, of course. I'm braced for, 'No, no, no. We really can't do anything with this. It's too weird, even for you.'

Get back to the typeface and write another, more traditional Christmas story.'

Rebecca – I should warn you now – I've got nothing.

I've tried to use the story to discuss the issues a little – but not enough to be boring. It's the old problem, isn't it? Just because a thing can be done, does it necessarily mean it should be done?

Yes – what a wonderful shortcut to the stars. But, as Commander Hay says, how do you value something that comes so easily? It's the step-by-step, catastrophe-laden, triumph and tragedy method of space exploration that gives us a proper perspective on what we do. In other words, we prize what we have fought for. What we have earned.

Or you can take Pinkie's point of view. That it's all within our grasp. People no longer have to die. We no longer have to devote a considerable percentage of the world's resources to getting into space.

I shall leave everyone to make up their own minds.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy it. I wrote it as light relief when I should have been concentrating on the latest St Mary's novel. I could picture Commander Hay's baffled fury at St Mary's actions, the can of worms it opened up, and her complete inability to impress Director Pinkerton with the possibly catastrophic implications of her team just nipping off to Mars now. Back by teatime.

I'm planning a book about the Time Police – possibly a series if it goes well – and I thought this might be a good way of getting my head around the characters.

This is a St Mary's story but not our usual St Mary's. Yes, Peterson and Maxwell are involved – and with great enthusiasm too, but only as contemporaries, so to speak.

My editor informs me that some words explaining the timeline might be helpful for everyone and, because I grudge no effort when it comes to persuading people to buy my books, here goes.

In Book 2 – A Symphony of Echoes – Leon disappears. Max, Peterson and Guthrie track him to a future St Mary's which is under attack by Clive Ronan.

Ronan is defeated and, in the absence of their director, Max appoints the former Chief Technical Officer, Miss Pinkerton as the new director.

Pinkie's main fear is that Ronan was after a piece of secret research. She successfully hid this in a fire bucket whence it was retrieved by Max.

The nature of this secret research is about to be revealed.

Back at Max's St Mary's, they're gearing themselves up to watch history being made, live on TV. Director Pinkerton, as a reward for

their assistance, jumps back in time to offer them a unique opportunity and off they all go. Boldly go, you could say, where no man has gone before. (I prefer the original thunderous split infinitive to the slightly more politically correct Next Generation version.)

I always think of the Time Police as Roundheads to St Mary's Cavaliers.

Roundheads – right but repulsive.

Cavaliers – wrong but wromantic.

The Time Police are perfectly correct, of course. The appearance of St Mary's at the Mars landings changes History. And Pinkie's plan to make her technology available to everyone, while well meaning, is just what they – veterans of the future Time Wars – would want to prevent. At any cost.

This is Pinkie's story. Director Pinkerton, as she should be known. Hers was the brilliant idea, after all. It was her hard work. Her effort. Her inspiration. Although, I suppose, some credit should go to Commander Hay of the Time Police, who graciously allowed them all to live even after she'd found out what they'd done.

There's a Christmas tradition at St Mary's. Every year, on the flimsiest of pretexts, they leap into a pod and for reasons that usually seem good at the time – especially after an eggnog or two – they hurl themselves at the timeline. To right wrongs. To vanquish foes. And, because he tends to take these things personally – to annoy the hell out of Dr Bairstow, as well. It usually ends well. One day it won't, I know, but that's up to them to deal with when it happens.

Anyway, that's their Christmas tradition – to instigate an illegal Christmas jump and do something a little outrageous. This is the story of Pinkie's illegal Christmas jump. Because remember – when you're at St Mary's it's always Christmas somewhere.

Location: Time Police HQ.

Date and time: Information redacted. At least until the dust settles and probably not even then.

An anguished and bloodcurdling scream echoed down the corridor. It spoke of frustration, rage, and a dreadful, impotent fury.

All along the corridor, people shut their office doors, turned out the lights and pretended they hadn't come into work that day.

On the floor below, safely out of harm's way but not out of earshot, a minor clerk remarked that this was new and interesting – she'd never done that before. He was instructed to shut up and get on with his work.

Back at the source of the scream, Commander Hay struggled for and apparently achieved a level of calm, although the other person in the room, her adjutant Captain Farenden, in no way found this reassuring.

Thumping both fists on her desk, she demanded, 'How the hell could this happen, Charlie?'

'Well, Commander, apparently ... just before the time of Director Pinkerton, St Mary's was attacked by Clive Ronan. They were betrayed by their director – you'll remember Alexander Knox, I'm sure – and the whole thing was sorted out by Doctors Maxwell and Peterson, together with Major Guthrie and ...'

She clutched her letter opener in a manner that might be construed as illegal in a court of law. 'I gave instructions those names were never to be mentioned in my presence again.'

'Very well, ma'am. In the aftermath of the attack by Clive Ronan, She Who Should Not Be Named ...'

He was impaled by a Look. The letter opener might possibly be only seconds behind.

'Don't push your luck, Charlie.'

'No, ma'am. Well, in the aftermath of the attack by Clive Ronan and the execution of Director Knox, a new Director was appointed. Director Pinkerton. She was something of a technical wizard and was heard to remark to ... after the situation had been resolved she said to ... I'm really not sure how to proceed, ma'am, not without ...'

She sighed. 'Mention her damned name.'

'Thank you, ma'am. She told Maxwell that she'd been pursuing a line of research that was quite revolutionary. That would change everything. In fact, that was what she thought Ronan had come for. That he'd got wind of her discovery somehow. She hid the data stick in a fire bucket to keep it away from him and from which it was subsequently retrieved by Dr Maxwell.'

‘And no one thought to follow this up?’

‘Well, we were unaware of most of the details at the time, ma’am. It was regarded as an internal issue. And Clive Ronan was not the threat then that he is now. And it’s St Mary’s, so the consensus was that it was unlikely most of them were aware of the existence of planet Earth, let alone anywhere else. In short, Commander, they’re idiots.’

‘But intelligent idiots, it would seem.’

‘Possibly, ma’am. I understand Director Pinkerton is widely regarded as an engineering genius.’

‘And this engineering genius – and several of her colleagues – have travelled ...’ she paused and breathed heavily. ‘Even now I can hardly believe it ...’

‘I assure you, ma’am, it’s perfectly true. They have ...’ He stopped.

‘Go on. Say it.’

‘Ma’am, it would appear that Director Pinkerton and several of her colleagues, together with Doctors Maxwell and Peterson, have, somehow, contrived to take a pod to ...’ He paused and gathered himself. ‘To the planet Mars.’

A second scream did not reverberate along the corridor but it was touch and go for a moment, before she sat back in her chair and, to the relief of her adjutant, put down her letter opener, a wicked-looking blade modelled on a 14th-century misericord and in the right – or possibly the wrong – hands, more than capable of inflicting a lingering, painful, and very messy death.

‘All right,’ she said, a little more calmly. ‘Tell me everything. From the beginning.’

Captain Charles Farenden, whose official job description was Adjutant to the Commander of the Time Police, and whose unofficial description was variously Buffer Zone, Sacrificial Lamb, Young Man with an Abbreviated Life Expectancy, or the Voice of Reason, depending on who was describing him, sighed heavily and painfully shifted his weight to favour his good leg.

Commander Hay, catching this movement, pointed to a chair. ‘Sit down Charlie, for God’s sake.’

Rightly interpreting this as a sign that the first flush of all-encompassing, incandescent, blood-demanding rage had subsided to mere red-hot fury, Captain Farenden gratefully obeyed.

Silence fell in the office. Outside, and clearly visible through the window behind her, the noon-day dirigible chugged sedately past on its way to dock at Westminster.

Commander Hay turned to watch it go. ‘Do you miss the good old days, Charlie?’

‘Well, I don’t think the Time Wars were that good for either of us,

ma'am. Neither of us emerged unscathed, did we?'

'True, but desk jobs aren't that much fun.'

'Mine is not without excitement, ma'am. Sometimes on an almost hourly basis.'

She swivelled her chair to face him again.

Commander Hay was a short, thin woman whose age would forever be undetermined owing to an unfortunate accident incurred during the Time Wars. During an emergency evacuation, her already damaged pod had lost its door, exposing herself and the other members of her crew to whatever was out there. One side of her face was now considerably older than the other. The effect was disconcerting – something she had no difficulty in exploiting to her own advantage when necessary. The other occupants of her pod had not been so lucky. They had died and it had not been pretty.

'So go on, Charlie. Tell me what happened.'

'Well, ma'am. Under the directorship of Dr Alexander Knox – and what a mistake he turned out to be ...'

'Never mind that now.'

'No, ma'am. Anyway, Dr Knox colluded with the known renegade, Clive Ronan, to invade St Mary's. Their object was, apparently, to seize as many pods as they could lay their hands on. The plot failed, largely thanks to the determination of St Mary's personnel to defend their unit to the end. I know, ma'am, that we generally regard them as irresponsible idiots with the life expectancy of a snowflake in a furnace, but no one can deny that, on that occasion at least, their stubborn defiance was a blessing. They held Ronan's men off for long enough to enable Director Pinkerton – or Chief Technical Officer Pinkerton as she was then – to get the pods safely to their remote site. People died, ma'am, but Ronan was defeated in the end, largely thanks to the intervention of Doctors Maxwell and Peterson and Major Guthrie.'

He paused, in case his commander wished to comment, but she remained silent.

'Anyway, to cut a long story short, Director Pinkerton was heard to remark that she had been afraid that Ronan's actual purpose was to seize a particular piece of research she had been working on. Something that, had it fallen into his hands, would have been very serious indeed.'

The commander stirred. 'And after this security scare, it didn't occur to her to destroy this research and put it not only beyond Ronan's reach, but everyone else's as well?'

'I think it's safe to say, ma'am, that such a thought would not have entered her mind.'

'Of course not. Why would it? Continue.'

‘Well, ma’am – that’s it really. It took her some years, but Director Pinkerton finally completed her research and invited Maxwell and Peterson to accompany her ... um ... to witness the first manned landing on Mars. As a thank you gesture for the assistance they had rendered in her hour of need.’

‘She couldn’t just have sent flowers?’

‘Apparently she felt that gesture would have been inadequate.’

‘And Dr Bairstow gave permission for this ... this jaunt?’

‘I believe he expressed great regret he could not accompany them.’

‘He’s as bad as they are.’

‘Indeed, ma’am.’

‘In fact, they’re all as bad as each other.’

‘If you say so, ma’am. Anyway, our Map Master reported an anomaly with the Time Map. No one could make head nor tail of it for some considerable time but, after a great deal of investigation, not a little disbelief and even more investigation, she has advised me that Director Pinkerton, her Chief Technical Officer,’ he groped for his file, ‘er ... Chief Rice; his assistant, er ... Miss Burroughs; together with Dr Maxwell and Dr Peterson ... appeared to have jumped to Mars.’

‘Why? And do not say, “Why not?”.’

‘No, ma’am. Their purpose was to witness the first manned landing on the Red Planet, ma’am. According to Director Pinkerton, this constituted a perfectly legitimate historical assignment.’

‘As if it isn’t bad enough to have that bunch of history-watching half-wits rampaging up and down the timeline jeopardising Time and God knows what else, now they’re out there disrupting the space programme.’

‘Actually ma’am, it’s slightly worse than that.’

‘Dear God, please tell me the bloody woman isn’t orbiting Jupiter as we speak.’

‘No ma’am. At least, I believe not, but what I was going to say was that actually, yes, they did disrupt things. But only very slightly.’

‘How can you disrupt things slightly? It’s like being pregnant. You can’t be slightly pregnant. Either you’re pregnant or you’re not. Aren’t you?’

‘Er ... no, ma’am. I’m not pregnant.’

Things hung in the balance for a moment and then settled down again. Looking around her as if noticing for the first time, Commander Hay demanded to know the whereabouts of her senior officers.

Captain Farenden was tactful. ‘I believe, ma’am, their duties this morning have caused them to ...’

‘To be five hundred years and a thousand miles away.’ He smiled reluctantly. ‘Something like that, ma’am.’

‘So they sent you.’

‘I would have come anyway.’

There was just enough steel in his voice to make his point.

‘Sorry, Charlie. I really don’t pay you enough for this, do I?’

‘Not nearly enough, ma’am. A point I intend to bring up at length during my personal appraisal next month.’

‘Good of you to warn me.’

‘I wanted to give you plenty of time to marshal your arguments against paying me a wage commensurate with my skills and experience. Are you feeling more yourself now?’

Silence fell. Outside, a commercial dirigible began the slow climb to the Calais air corridor. It is entirely possible that both Commander Hay and Captain Farenden wished they were aboard.

She picked up her paper knife again. ‘Could someone please jump back to St Mary’s, present my compliments to Director Pinkerton and request a few minutes of her time, if she would be so good.’

‘I’ll see to it at once, ma’am.’

He limped from the room.

Some time later, Captain Farenden ushered in a stocky, square woman who wore her sandy hair in a long, thick pigtail over her shoulder and on whose jaw you could, if you so wished, crack walnuts.

‘Director Pinkerton is here, ma’am.’

‘Good afternoon, Director Pinkerton. Stay please, Charlie.’

Captain Farenden limped to a chair in a discreet corner and settled down to enjoy himself.

Director Pinkerton opened the batting. ‘Good afternoon, Commander. May I enquire why I’ve been dragged away from my duties?’

‘Dragged? I thought I phrased my request more politely than that?’

‘Request? Two of your officers appeared at my elbow and gave me to understand my presence was required at Time Police Headquarters immediately. Failure to comply was, apparently, not an option. Believe me, the word request was not mentioned in any way.’

‘My apologies.’

‘Happily accepted.’ She got up to go. ‘I’ll be off then.’

‘Just one moment, if you please, Director Pinkerton. There are one or two small matters I wanted to discuss with you.’

Director Pinkerton frowned. ‘I’ve usually found a well-aimed memo to be slightly more effective than kidnapping.’

‘Not in this case, I’m afraid. It has come to my attention, Director, that under your auspices, an illicit jump has taken place.’

‘I assume you’re talking about our jump to Mars. Yes, indeed. I led a team to the planet Mars. I gather you’re not happy about it and are casting around for someone to blame so please be very clear about this. I put together and commanded the mission. I led the team. Everyone present was acting on my instructions.’

Commander Hay said bitterly, ‘I am quite astonished to hear that Doctors Peterson and Maxwell are capable of acting on anyone’s instructions.’

‘I can’t think why you find them so difficult. They didn’t give me any trouble. In fact, they seemed very keen to be involved.’

Commander Hay flicked through her datastack. ‘I have conducted a thorough search, Director, and nowhere can I find any request for permission ...’

‘You won’t. I didn’t request anything. I just did it.’

‘Without consultation?’

‘I’m Director of St Mary’s. I don’t need permission to make a jump.’

‘You jumped to Mars.’

The words reverberated around her office like four hundred and thirty-nine empty cans rolling down a cobbled street. In an echo chamber. At the dead of night. In a Noise Abatement Zone.

Director Pinkerton shrugged. ‘I fail to see what that has to do with the Time Police. Under the terms of the treaty negotiated after the Battle of St Mary’s, we are free to pursue our own areas of research.’

‘Historical research. You are free to pursue your own areas of historical research.’

‘Well, it is historical research to us. The Mars landings took place before I was even born.’

‘But not to Maxwell and Peterson. In this instance they were contemporaries.’

‘Well, yes, but we thought it would be a nice treat for them.’

‘A nice treat! Why couldn’t they have watched it on TV like the rest of the world?’

‘Well, they could, of course, but it was such a special moment, we thought they would enjoy a ringside seat.’

‘You jumped to bloody Mars. Are you completely unaware of the implications?’

‘No, of course not. They are rather exciting, aren’t they?’

Commander Hay breathed rather heavily. ‘Perhaps you would care to enumerate them.’

‘Commander, if we make my technology available, the struggle to

get into space is over. The costly struggle. Costly in terms of lives, time and money. No two-year round trip to Mars with all the logistical and psychological problems that entails. No waiting for launch windows or Hohmann transfer orbits. No more struggling with EM drive – which is never going to work despite everything they throw at it. All we have to do is get the coordinates right and hey presto! Don't you see what this means?' she said, sitting up in sudden excitement. 'We can go anywhere we like. It's just a question of building the appropriate vehicle and doing the maths. It's another giant leap for mankind.'

'Exactly. Have you given any consideration to the consequences? Forget the time factor. If you make this available to just anyone, then walls, gaols, borders, any distances – great or small – will mean nothing. Never mind Mars – an assassin has only to jump into someone's bedroom, shoot at will, or plant a bomb, or kidnap a world leader, and then jump away again. The implications are enormous.'

'Yes, I know. I just told you that.'

'You are an historical research organisation. You have exceeded your remit.'

'And you are exceeding yours. You're the Time Police. You said yourself to forget the time factor. That this had nothing to do with time. Therefore, it has nothing to do with you.'

They glared at each other.

'I could have you removed, Director.'

She waved a dismissive hand. 'It's already been tried – Clive Ronan, Alexander Knox, Colonel Albay. Every time the Time Police try to interfere with St Mary's, it always ends the same way. Surely you've realised by now that we're not so easily intimidated.'

'You broke your own rules. You interfered.'

Again, the room went very quiet. Captain Farenden, very carefully not minuting this meeting, looked out of the window again. A teenage jetpacker whizzed past, almost certainly exceeding the speed limit, closely followed by a speed drone, flashing its blue light.

Director Pinkerton sighed. 'Well, yes and no. We did, but only a very little bit – and then only with the greatest reluctance. If there had been a fatality on the very first Mars mission then the whole thing would have been shut down there and then, and there might never have been any further missions to Mars – not manned missions, anyway – and we both know that didn't happen, so really you could say it was our duty to interfere.'

'Do I detect an echo of Dr Maxwell in your response? That sounds very much like her reasoning to me.'

'We might have a similar point of view. We do work for the same

organisation after all.'

'Whose prime directive is never to interfere.'

'And my argument is that we didn't. Not really. There is no record of any fatalities on the first Mars landing. We simply took steps to keep it that way.' She let the silence hang.

'Very well, Director, I take your point. Perhaps, then, you can describe what actually transpired and then I can decide what action to take.'

'I'll certainly tell you what happened if you're interested, but as to what action to take, I can tell you now it will be none. St Mary's is not within your remit. We did nothing to affect the timeline, therefore there is no case to answer. Doctors Maxwell and Peterson are still my guests and, if you like, I can produce Deputy Director Peterson. I'm sure he'll be happy to support my argument.'

'I don't think any useful purpose can be served by interrupting Dr Peterson's day.'

'Dr Maxwell, perhaps.'

'Not under any circumstances.'

'Well, what can you do, then? Besides, you're shouting at the wrong people. The real villain of the piece was the solar flare and that was just a random act of nature.'

If Commander Hay thought the phrase random act of nature was also a more than accurate description of St Mary's she was polite enough to keep that to herself. 'Just tell me what happened, Director Pinkerton, if you would be so good.'

'Well,' she said, making herself comfortable. 'It was Christmas Eve at our end. We have a kind of tradition of doing something daft on that day and we wanted to do something special so we thought we'd go to Mars. I remembered a promise I'd made to Maxwell a while back, so we jumped back to Dr Bairstow's St Mary's ...'

'On the way to Mars.'

She nodded. 'Yes, that's right. We called in on our way to Mars to see if Dr Bairstow would give his permission for us to borrow some of his staff. As a courtesy. You can't just swan in and walk off with other people's people, you know,' she said, and paused to let that sink in. 'We're not Clive Ronan. Have you caught him yet by the way?'

'Perhaps we could confine ourselves to the discussion in hand?'

'So that would be a no – you haven't.'

There might have been just the slightest suggestion of gritted teeth. 'If you could continue, Director.'

'Well, they made us very welcome. Initially, I think they thought we'd come to witness events with them. You know, watch it on live TV and join in the festivities. We were even offered appropriate costumes. I have to say I have always rather fancied myself as Deja

Thoris.'

There was a short silence and then Commander Hay twisted in her seat to look at her adjutant, eyebrows raised.

'Princess of Mars, ma'am.'

'Really?'

'Indeed, ma'am.'

'You don't know the story, Commander?' said Director Pinkerton.

'I'm asking you.'

'Well, John Carter arrives on Mars – or Barsoom – and ...'

'Not that story!'

Mindful of his professional future, Captain Farenden focused all his thoughts on next weeks' watch roster.

'Well, once we told them we were aiming to witness the Mars landing on Mars itself, there was no holding them. They were really excited. As Maxwell said, it wasn't often you got to see History being made in your own time. They normally had to push off to another century if they wanted to see something interesting. So I said did she want to come with us, and she said oh God yes.'

'Of course she did. Didn't anyone enquire as to the safety of ... no, I'm sorry. I spoke without thinking.'

Director Pinkerton, whose method of dealing with sarcasm was to ignore it, forged on. 'I explained it was in the nature of a reward for their services in the past. Our past. Although their past as well because they've already done it although in their time it hasn't happened yet.'

It occurred to Commander Hay that a name was missing. 'What of Major Guthrie?'

'Declined the invitation.'

'Do we know why?'

'Well, I know why, yes.'

Commander Hay's eyes narrowed. 'And?'

'Nothing sinister. He was spending the day elsewhere.' She paused, possibly awaiting a demand for more details. It did not come. Captain Farenden suspected Commander Hay suspected Director Pinkerton of deliberately dragging multiple red herrings across the meandering path of her explanation.

'And this – this plan – this was what you were working on when Clive Ronan attacked your unit?'

'It wasn't my unit at the time, if you remember, Commander. It was Director Knox's unit. I believe he was a Time Police-approved appointment, wasn't he?'

'Not by me,' she said grimly.

'Nor me. In fact, other than Clive Ronan, I can't think of anyone who's done more damage to St Mary's than Alexander Knox. Can you,

Commander? Think of anyone who's done more damage to St Mary's than Alexander Knox, I mean?' She beamed across the desk.

Wisely, Commander Hay made no reply and the Director continued.

'Well, they were enthusiastically gearing themselves up for Mars Landing Day – as they were calling it. There were flags, banners and bunting hanging from every window. They'd made the most enormous papier-mâché model of the planet Mars which was hanging from the roof of the Great Hall. It was really rather well done. And very accurate. Their R&D section had knocked it up, apparently. They'd marked up Gale Crater and then divided the surface into numbered squares. Apparently, a prize would be awarded to the person who came closest to predicting the exact landing site.'

She paused, but comment there was none.

'All the tables were laid out and the entire menu was Mars themed, obviously. Mr Swanson had raided the poisons cabinet and he and Professor Rapson had concocted Mars Punch – a vast cauldron of murky red fluid, trailing ribbons of sinister smoke. To represent Olympus Mons, they said and two glasses of that could get you to Mars under your own steam, apparently. There were Red Rock Cakes and Little Green Gingerbread Men. They'd made vast amounts of honeycomb and giant pieces of it were scattered everywhere.'

Commander Hay appeared baffled. 'Why?'

'To represent the surface of Mars, of course. And there were plates of multi-coloured onion rings.'

'Again. Why?'

'Saturn. You know. The rings of Saturn. And Flying Saucer Beefburgers. And Mars bar eating competitions. Everyone had been practising for weeks. They were all in costume, obviously. Well, you know what they're like – they'll jump into weird clothes at the drop of a hat. Any number of people were dressed the way St Mary's thought astronauts should look. Wildly inaccurate, obviously. I mean, I'm sure they're well up to speed on all things medieval but I wouldn't have cared to risk my life in one of those spacesuits.'

She paused, obviously contemplating life – or, more probably, death – in a St Mary's spacesuit, caught Commander Hay's eye and continued. 'Someone had a fishbowl on his head – much to the distress of his chicken. There was some speculation as to how they were going to get it off again. Lump hammers seemed to be the preferred way forward. Anyway, almost everyone was encased in aluminium foil. Except for those dressed as Martians, in which case there were far more tentacles and eyes and slime than any director should reasonably have to contend with.' She smiled. 'I must say

they'd really put a tremendous amount of effort and enthusiasm into things. They must have been preparing for weeks.'

'It does sound rather jolly,' said Captain Farenden, possibly slightly more wistfully than he had intended.

'And that was only what we encountered on our way to Dr Bairstow's office. Fortunately, we were just in time for the Build Your Own Spaceship competition in Hawking. Sadly, we never got to see the homemade fireworks scheduled for the evening party. Though, on reflection, that might have been a good thing. Anyway, they said if I wasn't in any rush, would I like to help judge the spaceship competition and, of course, I was delighted. The first entry was from the Security Section and was actually on fire at the time. Whether inadvertently or not we never found out, but I was particularly interested in the way they'd managed to achieve ...'

Captain Farenden coughed in a meaningful manner.

'Well, never mind. I don't expect you're very interested in that, although it was a particularly ingenious method of ...'

Commander Hay made a truly heroic effort to smile pleasantly. 'I believe you were providing details of your recent jump to Mars, Director.'

'Captain Farenden, who wanted very badly to hear details of their recent jump to Mars, nodded encouragement. 'May I ask, Director, how did you overcome the problems of cosmic radiation? Solar winds and so on?'

'Piss.'

Commander Hay stared. 'I beg your pardon.'

'Sorry – urine. Radiation can't pass through water so each biosuit had a lining of water. Provided by the wearer and constantly replenished. We'd lagged the pod in a similar fashion but because of the quantities required, that had to be more of a joint effort.'

'With ... urine? You encased your pod in urine?'

'Oh, don't worry. Everyone wanted to be involved so there was no shortage of contributions. We did consider excrement – I'm sure you're aware it's seventy-five percent water – but you know what historians are like. It would have taken months to gather enough ... material ... for our purpose.'

'You were wearing spacesuits?' said Captain Farenden in a possibly doomed attempt to move the story on.

'Biosuits. Orange. In honour of the Technical Section. And to blend in with the red surface, just in case we had to go outside. You have to have protection on Mars, otherwise your body fluids would boil away. R&D designed them and our Wardrobe Department knocked them up. They're actually rather brilliant – there's an exoskeleton built in into the suit using shape memory alloy which

replaces muscle movements and supports the body so there's less energy used and we don't get so tired.'

'And you all had these ... biosuits?'

'Of course. For if we had to open the door and go outside for some reason.'

'You didn't have an airlock?'

'Yes, but only a very rudimentary affair. Obviously, safety was our first priority so everyone wore their biosuits and carried their own supply of oxygen.'

'Safety was your first priority?' echoed Commander Hay, disbelief dripping from her voice faster than a politician trousering the rewards of one of his more imaginative expenses claims.

'Well, yes, obviously. And what a good thing that turned out to be, don't you think?'

Commander Hay gripped her desk for patience. 'Can we return to the point, please? You're at St Mary's, collecting Peterson and Maxwell.'

'Yes. Dr Bairstow graciously granted permission for us to borrow two of his people, we drank a swift toast to success and departed with, I have to say, two very excited historians on board. They both insisted on making personal contributions to the radiation protection equipment. I daresay they meant well but sadly, a significant amount of Dr Peterson's missed the container completely. Dr Maxwell's overly harsh criticism had upset his aim, he said, and it turned out Dr Maxwell had been before she left so nothing was forthcoming there, but we thanked them anyway. We kitted them out, gave them basic instructions on how to operate their suit and what to do in an emergency, and climbed into our pod. Everyone turned out to wave us off which was kind of them, don't you think?'

Commander Hay appeared slightly dazed. 'And then you just ... jumped to Mars?'

Director Pinkerton nodded. 'That's about it, yes.'

Since his commander seemed temporarily without words, Captain Farenden deemed it appropriate to pick up the conversational baton. 'Can I ask, Director – how long did the journey take?'

'Slightly quicker than to 1st-century Rome but slightly longer than to Doggerland.'

He nodded. 'And your landing site?'

'Gale Crater. About two hundred yards to the west of the habitation domes and three hundred yards north of the fuel manufactories.'

'And they didn't spot you?'

'Camouflage device,' she said shortly.

Commander Hay re-entered the conversational fray. 'Thank God

you retained slight vestiges of common sense.'

'Well, obviously,' said Director Pinkerton indignantly. 'We didn't just throw the assignment together over a mug of tea and a chat by the photocopier, you know.'

Commander Hay glanced at Captain Farenden who again knew his duty.

'It's an accepted phenomenon, ma'am. People gather around the photocopier to talk. There's gossip, an update on who's sleeping with whom, new ideas, suggestions, and so on. It's a kind of informal brainstorming session. There are all sorts of topics covered and it can be extremely productive.'

'Don't we have meeting rooms for that sort of thing?'

'We have many meeting rooms, ma'am, but standing around a photocopier with a mug of coffee is generally thought to be more conducive to creative thought.'

'And that happens here?'

Captain Farenden thought quickly. 'I think, Commander, with respect, you should select the answer you will be most happy with and go with that.' In what he was almost certain was an effort to be helpful, Director Pinkerton kindly added that they might find the installation of a vending machine alongside the photocopiers to be most beneficial.

Leaving his employer to grapple with these novel concepts, Captain Farenden proceeded to satisfy his own burning curiosity. 'So – how did you get there? What was it like? What actually happened?'

'Well, getting there was easy enough. Once everyone was on board and settled, I laid in the coordinates and we ran a few quick tests. Everything seemed to be working properly so I said, "In your own time, Chief," and away we went. It really is going to make future space travel as easy as nipping down to the shops, you know.'

Captain Farenden intervened again before Commander Hay could outline her own plans for the future of space travel in general and Director Pinkerton in particular.

'But what was it like? When you got there, I mean?'

'Gale Crater? Perfect landing site. Evidence of possible geothermal energy, plenty of lava tubes to provide shelter from radiation and micrometeors, and nowhere near as rocky as we had thought it might be. We'd strengthened the hydraulic legs just in case we hit a patch of rough ground but it turned out we didn't need them. We were very familiar with the area in any case because ESA had been sending out equipment and modules for five years beforehand – you know, the MAV, habitats, rovers, 3D printers, life support systems, the fuel manufactory ... There were several living units already connected up and ready for use. We could see storage areas and what we thought

was probably the science block and work area. Next door to them were the hydroponics and food production areas. We assumed the unopened modules contained drilling equipment, aircraft, drones, and other odds and sods. Obviously, we'd carefully studied everything in the public domain and we were able to locate and identify nearly everything.'

'Why confine yourself to the public domain?' asked Commander Hay, grimly. 'Why not hack your way into their data records?'

'That would be illegal,' said Director Pinkerton, gently reproving. 'Anyway, everything was all there, all ready and waiting to be connected by tunnels and airlocks. In the event of an emergency, everything can be sealed off and each module can run independently. Well, it has to, doesn't it? If anything goes wrong, they're completely on their own and it's not as if they can ring and ask the engineer to pop round. But, most importantly – for them and for the sake of my story – the underground radiation shelter had been completed.'

'Protection from solar radiation,' said Captain Farenden, knowledgeably.

She nodded. 'Unlike Earth, Mars has no protection from solar or cosmic radiation. And, as we all know, they'd barely set foot on the surface before all hell broke loose, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. We watched the module land and ...'

Commander Hay stiffened. 'You were there to see the landing?'

'Yes,' she said patiently. 'That was kind of the point.'

'So you were actually on Mars when the first people arrived?'

'Yes. All ready and waiting. Recorders running. It's what we do.'

'So you were the first people on Mars?'

'Were we?' she said, vaguely uninterested. 'Yes, I suppose we must have been.'

Captain Farenden was very careful not to catch his employer's eye.

'Well, anyway, we watched the module land and as far as we could see through all the dust, it was spot on. Textbook stuff. Quite a tricky manoeuvre, you know,' she said with enthusiasm and sitting forward in her chair, all the better to demonstrate. 'Because, while Mars has enough atmosphere to cause a module to burn up on entry, there's not enough to make parachutes particularly effective, so they'd gone for a combination of retro rockets and parachutes combined. Their landing was a touch bone-jarring, perhaps, but nothing fell off and I always think that's a good sign, don't you?'

She didn't bother waiting for a reply.

'We'd been expecting it, of course, but Mars is very, very dusty. Everything was coated with the red stuff and the lander had kicked up a fair amount of it as well. They were going to have a hell of a job

keeping the solar panels clean and so on. I've no idea what it was going to do to the machinery but presumably they'd taken all that into account. I don't know whether they were waiting for it to settle, or whether they were working through their shutdown procedures, but it was about forty minutes before anyone appeared outside. They were a little bit weak and wobbly, but after seven months in space they would be, wouldn't they? From their chatter, we gathered they'd set aside an hour for learning to walk properly again and satisfying their natural curiosity. They split up and began to explore. Obviously, they should get themselves organised as soon as possible, but I don't think anyone could blame them for wanting to have a look around first, could they?'

Receiving no response, she swept on. 'We were so excited. We'd broken out the champagne and ...'

'You drank alcohol on a jump?'

'We certainly did,' she said with enthusiasm. 'After all, they'd overcome the Mars Curse.'

'The Mars Curse?'

'Yes. Anyway'

'What is the Mars Curse?'

'Well, they don't call it that, of course, in fact I don't think anyone ever mentions it at all, but a significant number of missions to Mars have been unsuccessful. I always imagine hundreds of Martian teenagers crouching in foxholes and taking pot-shots at landing satellites, although that's probably not very likely. I think nearly all the Russian attempts failed. NASA lost five out of their twenty missions, I think, which is a lot for them. The Beagle Two reached Mars and promptly vanished. The Schiaparelli failed on descent. The list goes on and on.'

Commander Hay, possibly fearing that the list would indeed go on and on, said, 'Shall we return to your drinking on the job?'

'Of course, since you attach so much importance to it, but before you pay a disproportionate amount of attention to our flagrant breach of the rules, there were five of us and one bottle of champagne equalled about half an inch of alcohol each. We toasted the success of their mission and barely had we done that than the door to the lander opened and out they came.'

'We had the cameras on maximum zoom and were able to identify each of them as they emerged. Helpfully, they had their names emblazoned on their helmets, front and back so it was quite easy.'

There was Commander Koshnazar. As the Big Cheese, he made a short speech as he stepped out. Actually, we thought he rather went on a bit. Nowhere near as punchy as 'One small step for man ...?' Followed by Technicians Zelazny and Baxter, our old friend – as he

was about to become – First Officer Lewis, and scientists Bradbury, Carpenter and Verhoeven.’

Captain Farenden found he could restrain himself no longer. ‘But what was it like? To be there? To see it for yourself?’

Director Pinkerton regarded him with approval. ‘Have you considered applying to the History Department? You’re asking all the right questions.’

‘Kindly refrain from attempting to poach my staff, Director.’

‘Sorry. Well, I know Mars is smaller than Earth, but actually, it seems much bigger. Apart from the occasional dust devil, nothing moves. And it’s silent. But mostly – and we were very conscious of this – it’s empty. We were the only life on an entire planet. It’s harsh. And unforgiving. Make just one mistake and Mars will kill you. But it’s also our hope for the future. Our second home. It’s ironic, don’t you think? I belong to an organisation that spends almost its entire life looking at the past and there we were, that day, looking at the future.’

She seemed to drift off for a moment. Accustomed to the tendency of senior managers to experience these momentary lapses of concentration and experienced in dealing with them, Captain Farenden rattled his scratchpad. She came to with a jerk.

‘Well, everyone knows what happened next. There was a lot of excited chatter. Walking about. Pointing. Bending to pick up rocks. Pointing at Mount Sharp. Looking around. Trying to find Earth in the sky. Lovely, normal stuff. And then – literally out of the blue, although I suppose we should say pinky-brown on Mars – came the warning.’

Commander Hay was caught up despite herself. ‘The oncoming solar flare.’

Director Pinkerton nodded. ‘Ironic, wasn’t it? They’d barely been there an hour when this monster came ripping through space and then there were no more for the next two and a half years. Everyone knows the story, of course. The flare was picked up by the Radiation Assessment Satellites positioned around Mars. And it was a big one. Eighteen minutes out. They probably had nearer twenty-five minutes before it arrived, but eighteen was always the number they worked on. Everyone knew what to do. They stopped what they were doing, dropped everything and headed straight towards the underground shelter which would be their only protection. We were picking up their chatter. Their commander was counting heads and one was missing.’

Commander Hay said bleakly, ‘And he was missing because ...?’

There was rather a nasty pause and then, with the air of one marching to the dentist’s chair, Director Pinkerton said, ‘Because he

ran slap into the side of our camouflaged pod and knocked himself out cold.'

'And this was their First Officer? Lewis?'

She nodded. 'And now we had a problem, of course. If it wasn't for the solar flare we could have left him to come round and return to base under his own steam. Or be found by his colleagues as soon as they realised he was missing. It wouldn't have been a problem. But there was a solar flare on its way and if we left him where he was then he would die.'

Commander Hay intervened. 'Setting aside the unfortunate Lewis for one moment, were you safe?'

'Well, we weren't too sure about that, either. General space radiation – yes. Something as energetic as a solar flare ... not too sure. We hadn't planned to stay much longer than an hour, anyway. Our thinking was that we would witness the landing and then jump away. Before the solar flare turned up. But now we couldn't, because of First Officer Lewis. It's a shame really, because we thought everything was going rather well right up until that moment.'

'Well, you got that wrong,' said Commander Hay with some satisfaction.

'It was unfortunate, obviously.'

'Unfortunate? You all but wrecked the mission not one hour after their landing.'

'I do think that might be overstating the case a little. But anyway, having, to some extent, been implicated in his unfortunate accident, we felt we should do something, but we also knew we couldn't hang around.'

'Lost faith in your own urine, had you?'

Director Pinkerton said carefully, 'There was a possibility that, at that very moment, I wasn't quite as confident as I had been. And Maxwell said she had no confidence in Peterson's urine at all. And even if the flare didn't damage us it probably wouldn't do the pod a lot of good. And Dr Peterson said he hadn't yet been granted the opportunity to pass on his genes to the next generation. For which, said Dr Maxwell, the next generation had asked her to pass on their grateful thanks.'

'For God's sake tell me this discussion didn't take place over the unfortunate Mr Lewis's unconscious body?'

'A little bit before, actually, because we were just gearing ourselves up for the return jump when Chief Rice, who was monitoring the cameras, shouted, "Look out," and there was a bit of a thud.'

Silence fell in the room and then Commander Hay repeated, 'A bit of a thud.'

Director Pinkerton nodded.

After a while, it became apparent that no further information was to be forthcoming.

‘Would it be safe to say that without your presence – your unauthorised presence – First Officer Lewis would not have been injured?’

‘Well, we don’t know that, obviously. Even if we hadn’t been there, he could have tripped. Or fallen. Or twisted an ankle.’

‘But he actually ran into your pod?’

‘You could say that.’

‘I am saying that. He was unconscious, on the ground, and with only minutes before a deadly solar flare was due to hit.’

‘Actually, believe it or not, that wasn’t his greatest problem.’

‘Which was?’

‘Well, I’m not sure if you’re aware of this ...’

‘Let us assume that I am not.’

‘Well, he was in some danger of drowning.’

‘On Mars.’

‘Yes.’

‘The planet with no water.’

‘Well, that’s still open to massive speculation of course. In fact, after recent discoveries at the poles, current opinion has veered back to ...’

‘Never mind current opinion. Get back to the poor sod you’ve just assaulted with a blunt instrument – to whit – one pod.’

‘There’s no need to shout.’

‘There’s every need to shout. Not only did you make an unauthorised jump to a ... sensitive ... location, but your actions directly interfered with ...’

‘With History, commander. Not time. You appear to be experiencing some difficulties in telling the difference.’ She sat forward eagerly. ‘Allow me to explain.’

Commander Hay’s adjutant, a young man with a chestful of ribbons for conspicuous bravery, realising that some of the most dangerous moments of his career might be occurring before his eyes, took a deep breath and got casually to his feet, saying, ‘Shall I order some coffee?’

It was only a small intervention but it was sufficient. Both protagonists hauled themselves back from the brink. The world breathed again.

‘How could he possibly be in danger of drowning?’

‘Believe it or not, this sort of thing has happened before. An astronaut nearly drowned once when his water dispenser malfunctioned and caused his helmet to fill up. We couldn’t take the

chance of that happening again. We angled the cameras for a closer look and there was the unfortunate Mr Lewis stretched out on the ground with a nasty splat of blood on the inside of his visor. And still out cold, of course.'

'Could his colleagues get to him in time?'

'Probably not. Say five minutes had elapsed while they tried to raise him. Five minutes to get to him. Slightly longer to get back because they'd be carrying him. Too close for comfort. They just didn't have enough time.'

'So he was going to die.'

'Well, that's just it, commander. No one died on the first Mars mission. You know that. Yes, the second mission was a bit of a catastrophe but the first one was perfect.'

'But he should have died.'

'Well, I'm not sure the word should apply to anyone's dying. No one should die.'

'Lewis should have.'

'I don't think you quite understand, Commander. It was vital the mission did not end in catastrophe or disaster. And it didn't.'

'I think, in this instance, our ideas of catastrophe and disaster might be entirely different.'

'Commander, decades of planning and effort had gone into this manned mission to Mars. There had been unprecedented international cooperation. The Chinese, the Japanese, the Europeans, even the Americans had contributed in some way. A disaster to the mission would have been far more than a disaster to the mission. If you get my drift. There was no way we could allow that to happen.'

'So you saved his life.'

'It needed saving.'

'Only because you were there illegally.'

But if we hadn't been there we wouldn't have been able to save him.'

'If you hadn't been there he wouldn't have needed saving.'

The tin cans were rolling down the cobbled street again.

'Well, as you yourself just said, we didn't have a choice.'

Commander Hay blinked. 'I really don't think I said any such thing.'

'Yes, you did. You more than implied it was our fault.'

'It was your fault.'

'And so,' said Director Pinkerton, picking up on that point, 'it was our responsibility to put things right.'

'But you didn't put things right. You made them considerably worse.'

A picture of bewildered innocence that fooled no one, Director

Pinkerton enquired in what way had she made things worse.

Commander Hay slapped her desk in frustration. ‘Can’t you see what you’ve done? The implications of what you’ve done?’

Director Pinkerton, who could see very clearly what they’d done and was not completely oblivious to the implications, but who was also aware of the folly of showing fear in the face of the Time Police, replied serenely that of course she could. ‘We ensured the success of the first manned mission to Mars. The eyes of the world were watching. All those people poised to protest about how the cost, the effort and the resources should have been channelled into something they thought more important would have gone into overdrive. To have someone die in the first hours of the first manned mission to our first planet ... I couldn’t allow that to happen.’

Commander Hay was on her feet. ‘It wouldn’t have if you hadn’t been there in the first place.’

‘But it’s our job, Commander. We observe historical events in contemporary time. To do that, you actually have to be there. At the right time and in the right place. In this instance ... Mars.’

There was a short silence and then, in the voice of one expecting the worst, Commander Hay said, ‘You went outside to get him, didn’t you?’

‘Well, not me personally. My team and I were monitoring radiation levels and communications. Maxwell and Peterson said they didn’t have much on at the moment so they’d go. It only took a few minutes. They already had their suits on. We got them helmeted, carried out a quick oxygen check and away they went.’

‘Across the surface of Mars.’

Director Pinkerton briefly contemplated a sarcastic, ‘No – across the surface of Pluto,’ response, but wisely decided against it, and nodded instead.

Commander Hay walked to her window and stared unseeingly at London happening around them. ‘Charlie, why don’t we know anything about this?’

‘No one knows about it,’ said Director Pinkerton. ‘As far as the world is concerned, the first manned mission to Mars was flawless in its design and execution. It paved the way for three subsequent missions and laid the foundations of the Gale One and Two settlements. And I believe more settlements are planned.’

‘That’s what would have happened, but now – now – thanks to you – it can’t.’

‘Really? I don’t see why not?’

‘Let me summarise. You caused an injury to a member of the crew. He should have died.’

‘No, he shouldn’t. That’s the point I’m trying to make. He should

not have died. Therefore, it was up to us to ensure he didn't. So we did.'

'How?'

'Successfully.'

Commander Hay gritted her teeth. 'How? How exactly did you ensure his survival?'

'Well ... Maxwell and Peterson nipped outside and brought him back into the pod.'

'What?'

'Oh, it wasn't a problem, we were monitoring communications and we knew we had a whole six minutes before the flare hit. They half-lifted, half-dragged him in – things weigh less on Mars, you know,' she explained kindly. 'And we had the airlock sorted this time and it worked very well, I'm pleased to say. Everyone was safely inside and we still had two minutes to spare.'

'But with a decision to make,' said Captain Farenden, softly.

'Yes. From the information we'd gathered, we knew the flare would last twenty-five minutes longer than First Officer Lewis's oxygen. All the other astronauts were piling into their underground shelter. They were calling to him right up until the very last moment. We were very tempted to respond but we didn't. Their last sentence was cut off in mid-word so we guessed they'd closed the hatch.'

She stopped. 'And we had to go, too, because we hadn't planned on staying that long. We were only going to stay until the arrival of the solar flare. We didn't have enough oxygen, either. Plus, as I said, while the piss protection was adequate for ordinary cosmic radiation we didn't have a great deal of confidence in its ability to protect us against a solar flare.' She took a deep breath. 'So we jumped.'

'You ... jumped?'

'Yes.'

'But what of Lewis? How were you able to jump with him on board?'

'Well, obviously he was marked for imminent destruction, wasn't he, which was why we were able to get him out.'

'But he didn't die.'

'Thanks to us.'

'But you were able to jump with him on board.'

'Because he was going to die.'

Commander Hay briefly closed her eyes, thrust away the niggling thought at the back of her mind because it was St Mary's and she needed all her wits about her, opened them again and shifted her ground slightly. 'And you took him back to St Mary's.'

'Yes.'

'To your own time.'

‘Yes.’

‘A contemporary.’

‘Yes.’

‘Just to be clear. A contemporary from the time of Maxwell and Peterson.’

‘Yes.’

‘You removed a man who would certainly have died, from his own time.’

‘Well, yes ... you said it. He would have died.’

‘As he should have!’

‘No, he shouldn’t, Commander. We’ve covered this already.’

Another unearthly cry of rage and frustration echoed through the Time Police corridors of power. Those just beginning to consider emerging for lunch thought better of it and remembered the existence of a pack of stale biscuits in their bottom drawer.

In the interests of moving things on, Captain Farenden enquired as to the whereabouts of First Officer Lewis. ‘At this very moment.’

‘Dead, I should think,’ said Pinkie, calmly, and blinked in their combined stares. ‘Old age probably. Remember, all this happened some time ago.’

‘I meant,’ he said carefully, perceiving his employer might temporarily be beyond speech, ‘where did you leave Commander Lewis?’

‘Oh, gotcha. Our medical centre.’

‘What?’ Commander Hay was back in the game.

‘Blissfully unaware, obviously. We’re keeping him unconscious.’

‘And your intentions concerning Commander Lewis?’

‘Well, we’re going to put him back, aren’t we? We can’t keep him. He’s not a pet.’

‘Director Pinkerton, are you taking any of this seriously?’

‘Yes of course I am, although you don’t make it very easy. We’ve spent the time examining every scrap of data we could lay our hands on and we’ve located a skylight some hundred yards from our landing sight.’

Commander Hay paused and again turned to her adjutant for clarification. ‘A what?’

He did not let her down. ‘A skylight, ma’am. A hole in the ground that is formed when part of a lava tube collapses.’

‘Lava tube?’

‘A natural passage, ma’am, made by lava flowing beneath the surface and leaving channels or hollow tubes in its wake.

Occasionally the roof falls in leaving what is known as a skylight.’

‘You seem to know a lot about it, Charlie.’

‘I was signed up for the astronaut training programme, ma’am,

but the Time Wars got in the way.'

Director Pinkerton regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, then turned back to Commander Hay and swept on with enthusiasm.

'The skylight is perfect, Commander. This is something down which he could conceivably have fallen but – and this is the important bit – it's below ground and will therefore offer him complete protection from the oncoming flare. We intend to leave him there and when the danger has passed his colleagues will form a search party at the earliest opportunity. He will be discovered safe and sound to worldwide relief. Still unconscious, obviously, and completely unaware of everything that has happened, but otherwise unharmed. The world will rejoice at his lucky escape and everything will be back on track.'

She beamed.

Captain Farenden, who had been performing some calculations on his scratchpad said, 'But his oxygen?'

Director Pinkerton's enthusiasm dimmed slightly. 'Well, yes, that is a small problem. The flare lasts twenty-five minutes longer than his oxygen supply so we'll have to give him a bit of a top up.'

'But his gauge will show...'

'Faulty gauge.'

'Is it?'

'It will be.'

'But how will you explain the discrepancy?'

'I shan't.'

'How will anyone explain the discrepancy?'

'They can't. It'll just be one of those things.'

'You realise the conspiracy theorists will go into overdrive and claim the astronauts never left Earth in the first place?'

She shrugged. 'It's not proper space exploration unless a large section of the population believes it never happened. Gives it validity, so to speak.'

Commander Hay sat back in her chair. Director Pinkerton stared out of the window, admiring the view. Captain Farenden shut down his scratchpad. The room was silent. Commander Hay appeared to be thinking.

Eventually, she said, 'And suppose I withhold my permission?'

Director Pinkerton smiled brightly. 'I don't need your permission, Commander, as you are well aware. Now, unless you're going to have me shot, I need to get back and release our young man back into the wild.'

'The shooting part has its attractions,' said the commander, vaguely, her thoughts elsewhere.

Director Pinkerton glanced again at Captain Farenden, occupied

with putting his scratchpad away, held the commander's eye for a moment and then said, '... And really, Commander, I find your suggestion that I permit a member of the Time Police to accompany us for the purposes of overseeing Mr Lewis's safe return to be grossly insulting.'

They looked at each other for a long, long moment until Commander Hay moved a pencil to the other side of her desk and said, 'Director Pinkerton, I'm afraid I must insist. The only way I can sanction any return to Mars is if a member of this organisation accompanies you. That is my final word on the subject.'

Neither of them so much as glanced at a suddenly frozen Captain Farenden before Director Pinkerton, with every show of reluctance said, 'Very well, Commander. If you insist.'

'I do. However, your cooperation is very much appreciated. Charlie – don't just sit there.'

'What? Sorry ma'am, I mean ... what?'

'Director Pinkerton has graciously given her permission for you to join them for their return trip. You'd better shoot off and do whatever you think is necessary before leaving for Mars.'

Captain Farenden, who, so far, had coped pretty well with whatever life had thrown at him, appeared to be struggling to keep up. 'Do you mean, ma'am ... I'm sorry, I'm not quite clear as to your intention and ...'

'My intention,' she said testily, 'is to despatch you to verify the safe return of the unfortunate Mr Lewis to his proper place in time and space and then ensure Director Pinkerton's team return directly to St Mary's.' She paused, and then, with the air of one for whom revenge is sweet, continued, 'This re-classifying Pluto as a planet again has caused a lot of confrontation in certain quarters. I wouldn't put it past Director Pinkerton to go poking around the outer solar system as soon as she thinks my back is turned. And with Maxwell and Peterson egging her on. You know what they're like. Keep your ears open while you're at St Mary's and see what you can pick up.'

'A terrible disease probably,' he said, cheerfully, and slammed the door behind him.

Commander Hay smiled. 'Thank you, Director.'

'He's a nice boy.'

'He is. Try not to damage him.'

'I can make no promises but we'll give it our best shot. He looks as if a lot has happened to him already.'

'It has. I feel it's his turn for something good.'

'Understood.'

'Of course, should anything happen to him you may find you

need the coordinates of Alpha Centauri speedily to hand.'

'Understood.'

'Good luck, Director.'

'Thank you.'

The door closed behind her. Commander Hay swivelled in her chair, stared sightlessly out of the window, and frowned.

If Director Pinkerton thought she might return to the pod bay unescorted, she was mistaken. Two rather large officers were loitering with intent in the corridor. Instructing them to try to keep up, she set a brisk pace, remarking rather smugly to Captain Farenden that she bet he never thought he'd be doing this when he woke up that morning.

Feeling he should at least make a feeble effort to maintain Time Police prestige, he replied, 'Of course I did. Happens to me all the time. It gets old after a while, don't you think?'

She clapped him on the shoulder. 'You'll do.'

Ten minutes later, back at her St Mary's, she was ushering Captain Farenden into Hawking Hangar.

'Welcome to St Mary's, Captain.'

'Thank you, ma'am. Good to be here.'

'First visit?'

'To this current St Mary's, yes.'

Turning to her Chief Technical Officer, a tall Aboriginal with a strong accent, she said, 'We have a friend joining us today, Edgar. Make sure no one shoots him, will you?'

'I shall do my best, ma'am.'

'And our other guest?'

'Still sleeping peacefully.'

'Right then, let's get this show on the road before he wakes up. Maxwell and Peterson?'

'Availing themselves of our facilities.'

She was alarmed. 'Not the library?'

'No, ma'am – lunch.'

'Thank heavens. Get them down here, will you, please? Jump time in thirty minutes. And can someone get Captain Farenden a biosuit, please?'

'Um,' said Farenden, slightly embarrassed. 'I'm not sure I'm in a position where I will be able to make a contribution.'

'No problem,' said Chief Rice. 'This is St Mary's. There's always plenty of the amber nectar sloshing around. In fact, I feel a contribution coming on, meself. You just come along with me, mate.'

Assembling inside the pod some thirty minutes later, Director Pinkerton ran her eye over her crew. Chief Rice sat at the console. To his right, Miss Burroughs frowned at a bank of equipment. The

lockers had all been stripped out and the walls lagged with something that did not bear close examination.

A long bench ran along the wall where the lockers had been. Captain Farenden took his place alongside Dr Maxwell who seemed delighted to see him again.

‘Hey, Charlie. Fancy seeing you here. Some sort of punishment, is it?’

‘Probably.’ He stared down at the unfortunate Mr Lewis, still encased in his blue spacesuit and laid neatly on the floor at their feet.

‘You’ve got ten to fifteen minutes,’ reported the doctor, stowing his gear and getting to his feet. ‘After which he’s going to start coming around. He’s going to be very disorientated and groggy. It really would be best if he could be discovered as quickly as possible. At the very least someone should keep an eye on him until that happens. He shouldn’t be left alone.’

Director Pinkerton nodded. ‘Understood, doctor.’

‘Well, good luck everyone.’ He disappeared,

‘Everyone belted in?’ said Chief Rice. ‘All right, then. In your own time, Miss Burroughs.’

‘Sir. Computer, initiate jump.’

Captain Farenden, veteran of countless jumps, was conscious of a hot knot where his stomach used to be.

The computer intoned, ‘Jump initiated.’

And the world went white.

They landed with the very gentlest of bumps. For a moment, there was silence and then Maxwell said to Peterson, ‘See, that’s how everyone else does it.’

Peterson ignored her, saying brightly, ‘Well, here we are again.’

‘But not for long,’ said Dr Pinkerton. ‘Doctor Peterson and Captain Farenden, if you could organise Mr Lewis into the airlock, please. Dr Maxwell, you have the skylight’s position?’

‘I do, ma’am.’

Chief Rice turned from the console and said, ‘Director ... I think I should accompany them.’

‘No, I’m sorry, Chief. I need both you and Miss Burroughs here. We can’t afford to have anything happen to either of you.’

Both Burroughs and Rice looked as if they were trying not to sigh too deeply.

‘Quickly now. The flare has passed and the crew will be emerging at any moment. We must have him in place before that happens. Chief?’

‘Airlock ready and waiting, ma’am. Let’s hope it doesn’t turn anyone inside out this time round.’

‘What?’ said Captain Farenden, startled, but it was too late. He was bundled into the airlock alongside Dr Peterson who patted him amiably on the shoulder and told him to keep his pecker up, an expression which appeared to cause him considerable confusion.

Green lights flashed and the outer door opened.

‘And off we go,’ said Peterson cheerfully.

The First Officer Lewis Replacement Team assembled outside the pod and looked about them.

Barren was the first word for Mars decided Captain Farenden. Unforgiving was the second. This was not a gentle environment. It wasn’t hostile – or so he hoped – but a moment’s inattention or a careless mistake and it would kill him. He shivered, realising suddenly, that he was a very long way from home.

He looked down at his feet. Coarse red dust covered his boots already. He lifted his foot. His own footprint stared back at him.

I’m on Mars and that is my footprint. My footprint is on Mars.

He replaced his foot and looked around himself again. At the clear sky. At Mount Sharp, rearing five kilometres and more above him. Was that darker streak across the base actually clay? If so, was that evidence of water on Mars? And could that suggest there had once been life on Mars? His head swam a little.

‘Breathe,’ said Peterson, clapping him on the shoulder. Feeling that sometimes even St Mary’s could be helpful, Farenden breathed.

‘Right,’ said Maxwell. ‘Orientating ourselves thusly ...’ she shuffled sideways, ‘... the shelter is over there.’ She gestured towards a grit-and-sand-covered lump over to their left. ‘And the skylight is over there. About a hundred yards, gentlemen.’

‘Wait,’ said Farenden. He gestured in the direction of the shelter and whispered, ‘Can they hear us?’

‘Not from here, no.’

‘I mean, can they hear our communications?’

She shook her head. ‘Definitely not while they’re in the shelter. And probably not when they’re outside either. We’re on internal com. Still, let’s not hang around to find out, eh?’

Since Mr Lewis was still incapable of travelling under his own steam, Peterson grabbed his arms. Farenden and Maxwell took one leg apiece and they set off, all more or less in the same direction, across the surface of Mars. Captain Farenden could only assume that, for his companions, the bizarre lifestyle prevalent at St Mary’s had rendered their actions ordinary. For himself, he could only think – I’m on Mars. I’m on Mars. I should be minuting the monthly budget meeting but I’m on Mars instead. I’m manhandling an unconscious astronaut across the surface of a dead planet. And no – when I got up this morning I never thought I’d be manhandling an unconscious

astronaut across the surface of a dead planet.

And dead it was. To the naked eye, there was no life of any kind visible anywhere. To his list of Martian adjectives, Captain Farenden now added lonely.

Maxwell made a series of gestures that were, apparently, supposed to indicate they had arrived at their destination. Gently laying their burden in the Martian dust, they peered down the hole. The skylight appeared to be about six feet square. Not large, but large enough. Daylight penetrated only so far down. The rest was impenetrable blackness.

Farenden fumbled for his head light.

‘Careful,’ said Peterson. ‘We don’t want to give ourselves away.’ He peered down the hole. ‘The first thing we need to do is to ascertain the depth.’

‘Well, that’s easily done,’ said Maxwell. ‘See you in a moment,’ and before anyone could do or say anything, she jumped.

For a second or two, Peterson and Farenden were too stunned to move and then Peterson shouted, ‘Max – what the hell?’

‘She jumped,’ said Farenden in disbelief. ‘I don’t believe it. She jumped.’

‘Shit.’

The unfortunate Mr Lewis temporarily forgotten, they peered anxiously down into the depths.

A short historian beamed up at them, her grinning face illuminated by her suit light. ‘You should see your faces.’

Peterson was incensed. ‘You bloody idiot. What do you think you’re playing at? Thanks to you I’ve involuntarily increased the radiation protection of my biosuit quite substantially.’

‘Good job I’m down here, then. I don’t need the distinction of being the first person on Mars to be peed on.’

‘What the hell did you think you were playing at?’ demanded Farenden, before they could wander too much off topic

‘Well, we didn’t have a lot of choice, did we? We couldn’t faff around here all day worrying about how deep it was. We have to get him under cover and ourselves out of here as quickly as possible.’

‘That hole could have been hundreds, perhaps thousands of feet deep. Did that not occur to you?’

‘As I jumped – yes. But no one dies on the first mission, remember. So Lewis survives. So he’s successfully discovered. So the skylight couldn’t have been thousands of feet deep, could it?’

‘Actually, yes it could,’ said Farenden.

‘Yes,’ said Peterson. ‘You know I always hesitate to agree with the Time Police but, in this instance, he’s perfectly correct. It could well have been thousands of feet deep. You could have jumped to your

death and we would have had to improvise by leaving Lewis here on the surface and push off without you. And then I'd have had to explain to Leon.'

It was clear that for him, at least, this was where the difficulty lay.

There was a short silence and then a tiny voice beneath their feet said, 'Didn't think of that.'

'No, I didn't think you had because you're a bloody idiot. How could you be so stupid?'

'Second nature. Anyway, it's only about ten feet deep. Are you going to stand up there all day?'

'I'll come down. Farenden, you lower him after me.'

They manhandled Mr Lewis down into the lava tube.

Unfortunately, even given the reduced gravity of Mars, he was considerably heavier than they could comfortably manage. There was a great deal of grunting and cursing before he finally landed with more of a crash than any of them were happy with.

'Well,' said Captain Farenden, breathlessly. 'I suspect none of that was pretty.'

'He won't remember any of it,' said Peterson, prodding the blue clad figure with his boot.

'Just as well.'

Their headlights revealed an unnaturally smooth passage carved through solid rock by molten lava. The passage, wide enough to stand up in and for two to walk abreast ran almost dead straight, with its two ends – left and right – lost in impenetrable blackness. The floor where they were standing was littered with broken rock where the roof had caved in. Here, as everywhere else on Mars, there was only silence and stillness.

Farenden shivered.

Peterson was fussing around. 'Keep his head and shoulders up. That's it. We don't want to drown him. Not after everything he's been through.'

They arranged him in a gracefully reclining position.

'There,' said Peterson, arranging a leg to his satisfaction. 'He actually looks quite comfortable. Close enough to the skylight but out of any direct radiation. All very believable.'

They straightened up and for the first time, gave their full attention to their surroundings.

'Hey, look. What's that?'

Maxwell set off, scrambling across loose rock towards something only she could see.

Remembering his instructions, Captain Farenden felt a twinge of anxiety. 'Max, come back, we don't have time.'

‘Oh, come on, Charlie. We can’t come all this way and not take a quick look around.’

He felt moved to protest. ‘Our instructions were to drop him and go.’

It is doubtful whether either Maxwell or Peterson heard him.

‘What’s that?’ she said, pointing.

‘A rock,’ said Captain Farenden, firmly. ‘One of many.’

‘No, come and look at this.’

‘Come and look at what?’

He scrambled to join them, their headlights pooling white circles on the rocky walls.

She pointed. ‘What’s that?’

‘What’s what?’

‘That.’

‘What?’

She sighed impatiently. ‘That.’

‘Grooves in the rock.’

She turned to him. ‘Doesn’t it look like a pattern to you?’

‘No, it looks like striations in the rock.’

‘No, it doesn’t. Look. There’s a series of lines ...’ She pointed. ‘... And then the same number of little round holes. Like dots. Look. And the same over there as well.’

Peterson squinted. ‘No ... can’t see it myself. Are you sure you didn’t fall on your head?’

‘Why can’t you see it?’

‘Because it’s just random marks on a rock and we should be getting back.’

‘But this could be important, Tim.’

‘And will be discovered in its own time. We have to go, Max – they’ll be out looking for him any minute. For us to be discovered now would ruin everything.’

‘Charlie – what do you think?’

‘I’m on a strange planet, encased in a bizarre cocktail of not even my own urine, looking at something of an unknown origin and accompanied by a couple of lunatics who feature prominently on the Time Police’s list of People the World Would Probably Be Better Without. I don’t think my thoughts would be particularly helpful. Where are you going?’

Maxwell was examining the surface of the wall, her head light causing long dark shadows to jump from floor to ceiling and back again. Suddenly, she stood stock still.

Peterson ambled over. ‘Are you doing your Lot’s wife impersonation again? It’s very good but you usually have to have a

margarita or three inside you first.'

Silence.

'Max?'

Silence.

'Max, are you all right? For God's sake tell me you haven't succumbed to some ghastly Martian plague. You know – War of the Worlds but Worse. Holy shit.'

Farenden turned. 'What?'

Staring, Peterson said hoarsely, 'I don't think those are random striations after all.'

'They must be.'

'Why? Why must they be?'

'Because ... Well, because they must be. They can't be anything else.'

'Why not?'

'Well, honestly, if I don't keep telling myself that then my brain might explode. Which I think has already happened to Maxwell. I've never known her so quiet. Is she all right?'

'You should come and look at this.'

'What?' said Farenden in alarm. 'What is it?'

'It's a hand.'

'It's a what? What's a hand?'

'Something on the end of your arm.'

'I meant,' said Farenden with enormous patience, 'what is it that you think is a hand?'

'This hand here.'

'There's someone else here?'

He struggled across the pile of loose rock to where Max and Peterson were standing, staring dumbstruck at the wall. 'Oh my God. What is that?'

'It's a hand,' said Peterson, helpfully. 'Most of us have them.'

'And we don't appear to be the only ones.'

They stared. Some four feet off the ground, a small hand, outlined in whatever was the Martian equivalent to ochre, was revealed in their head lights.

'But ... How could this be here? It can't be real. It's a fake, surely.'

'Yes,' said Peterson, 'because the first thing our astronauts did on arrival was jump down here, rip off their gloves – something that wouldn't have done them any good at all – and paint their own hand on the wall. For the sole purpose of winding us up. Even to the extent of elongating the two middle fingers.'

Farenden looked more carefully. The two middle fingers were indeed noticeably longer than the outer ones. 'It's like something you see on Earth,' he said, still wrapping himself in his comfort blanket of

denial. 'There are caves with painted hands all over the world.'

'And,' said Peterson unsteadily, 'all over this one as well, it would seem.'

'It can't be,' said Captain Farenden, in the tone of one who hopes that it can't be but is looking straight at evidence to the contrary.

Peterson gestured. 'The evidence is there.'

And it was.

'It's a right hand,' said Peterson, suddenly.

'What of it?'

'The ones back on Earth ...' he paused to review the phrase and then hurried on. 'The ones on Earth are almost all left hands because the artists were right-handed. This one isn't. A left-handed Martian.'

Captain Farenden was not going down without a fight. 'You don't know it's a Martian.'

'No, you're right – a prehistoric human cave dweller knocked up a space vehicle out of a nearby monolith, fuelled it with mammoth dung and headed for Mars. Just so he could paint his hand. Adding bizarrely long fingers as a malicious joke.'

All his life, Captain Farenden was to remember standing in the cold, dark lava tube, trying to keep his balance on the loose, rocky floor, staring at a small hand outlined in ochre, illuminated by three head lights, and struggling to take in the implications. For him. For everyone.

Peterson had more immediate concerns. He put his hand on her shoulder.

'Max? Max? I know we always say we prefer you still and silent but you're scaring me now. Say something. Max – are you breathing? For God's sake – breathe.'

He thumped her on the arm. Not enough to knock her over but hard enough to wake her up.

She turned to him, her face eerily lit by Peterson's head light and whispered, 'Tim ...'

'I know.'

'But ... Tim ...'

'Max, I know.'

'But ...' she turned back to the wall, unwilling to drag her eyes away from the image. 'Tim, this is the greatest discovery since ...'

Peterson groped for a comparison. 'Fire? Chocolate?'

She wasn't listening as she scrabbled in her knee pocket for her recorder. 'Can I have some light here, please.'

Captain Farenden felt moved to protest. 'We should be leaving as soon as possible.'

'I'm sorry, Charlie, I can't quite hear you. Earpiece malfunction. Could you stand a little closer, please? Yes, that's better. And just tilt

your head a little, just so the light falls right here. Perfect.'

She began to pan across the wall.

'Are you even listening to me?' He turned to Peterson. 'Is she even listening to me?'

'Oh, I think we both know the answer to that one,' said Peterson. 'Which doesn't mean you're not right. Max. Time to move.'

She sighed. 'A moment longer.'

'No – now.'

'Dammit – I could scream with frustration.'

'Please don't,' said Captain Farenden, hastily. 'For a start, I don't like the look of parts of this roof. And I really think we should get back to First Officer Lewis.'

The eloquent silence indicated that two of their group had completely forgotten about First Officer Lewis.

'A little longer, surely,' whined Maxwell. 'Who knows what we might find further on. There might be representations of Martian animals. Their equivalent of mammoths or deer or bison. Or even some little stick figure Martians themselves.'

'Max, we really should be going,' said Peterson. 'The flare has passed. They'll be out looking for Lewis any minute now and as soon as they do they'll see this as well. What they mustn't see is us. Otherwise it invalidates everything on these walls. This is one of the most valuable historic finds of all time. You know the rules.'

With a sigh of regret, Maxwell reluctantly followed him back up the tunnel. Captain Farenden brought up the rear.

Arriving back at the skylight, the bad news was that Mr Lewis was no longer with them.

'What?' said Peterson, spinning around as best he could in a biosuit. 'Where ...?'

'We left him alone,' said Farenden, riddled with guilt. 'The doctor said not to.'

'Bloody bollocking hell,' said Maxwell. 'He must have regained consciousness and wandered off.'

'Unlikely,' said Peterson. 'Very unlikely. He didn't come past us.'

'So, where is he?' said Farenden. He looked up through the hole in the roof to the sky above. 'He's not down here and he didn't come past us. He couldn't possibly have climbed out by himself. Could he?'

They stared up and down the lava tube. The small circle of daylight in which they were standing faded to darkness no more than six feet away from them.

'I can't see his head light anywhere, can you? Where could he be?'

'His people must have found him, while we were gone,' said Captain Farenden. And then, possibly fearing an historian stampede back to the newly-discovered hand now that their responsibilities to

Mr Lewis appeared to be discharged, he continued, 'This is very fortunate for us. All we need now is to get back to the pod as soon as possible before anyone spots us. You go first, Dr Peterson, then I'll heave up Maxwell and then you can both pull me up.'

Boosted from below, Peterson raised a wary head over the lip and performed a thorough search of the surrounding landscape. 'No. There's no one in sight. But watch out for drones.'

Cautiously, he pulled himself up through the skylight. Maxwell and Farenden pushed from beneath.

'All clear. You're next, Max.'

She began to heave herself over the lip. 'Shit.'

'What?'

'The edge is beginning to crumble.'

'Quick.'

'Doing my best. Biosuits are all very well but definitely not designed for this sort of thing.'

She scrabbled at the lip with her free hand until, with Peterson's help, she was able to wriggle her way out.

Lying on their stomachs, she and Peterson peered down at Captain Farenden, busy brushing pebbles and grit off his helmet and shoulders.

'Stand on that rock and reach up,' ordered Peterson. 'We've got you.'

Fortunately, Captain Farenden was a tall young man. Reaching down, both Maxwell and Peterson grasped a wrist each.

'Heave,' said Peterson, and they did. There was a great deal of grunting, together with a request to know what the hell he'd had for breakfast that morning.

'Stop kicking your legs,' said Maxwell.

'I'm trying to find a foothold. Otherwise I'll just pull you down.'

'No, we're all right. Just hang on and let us pull you up.'

Peterson heaved. Maxwell released Farenden's wrist and scrabbled at his arm. 'Got you. Can you get a purchase anywhere?'

'Yes. Hang on.'

His flailing foot found a protruding rock and the next moment they were pulling him out of the hole. The three of them lay on their backs, panting.

'Everyone check their suits,' said Peterson. 'We can't afford any punctures and there are a lot of sharp rocks around. I've got the bicycle puncture kit should anyone have a problem.'

Maxwell awkwardly sat up and began to pat herself down. 'No, everything seems ...' and a huge crack appeared in the ground between her legs.

'Look out,' shouted Farenden. He made a grab. Peterson seized the

nearest limb – her leg – and the next moment the ground gave way completely and she was hanging over an empty space.

Peterson's gloved hands were clumsy. 'I'm losing you, Max. I'm going to drop you.'

'I've got her,' grunted Farenden, 'but not for long,' All around them, sand and small stones were cascading into the hole.

'Everything's giving way. Max, reach up. Give me your arm.'

'I can't.'

'You must.' If you fall back down there we'll never get you out again.'

'No. I'm losing my recorder.'

'Never mind your bloody recorder. The ground's crumbling around us and we won't get out so easily next time. Let it go.'

'No. I can't. It's got the cave art.'

'Max, let it go.'

'No.'

'Let it go or we'll all fall.'

'Tim ...'

'Max, you must.'

'I won't leave it behind.'

'Not the most important thing in the world right now.'

'How can you say that? Of course it is. Duck.'

Something sailed past his ear and skidded along the ground, raising a small plume of red dust as it did so.

'Don't lose it whatever you do because I swear – if either of you do – then the world will not be big enough to hide you. I will hunt you down and ...'

'Shut up,' said Captain Farenden. 'Give me your arm.'

Making a huge effort she swung her arm and Captain Farenden, hanging precariously out over the hole, grabbed it. With one of them clutching a leg and the other a wing, they hauled with all their might and up she came. The ground was giving way all around them and the three of them could go at any moment. Soil, grit and stones clattered into the rapidly expanding skylight.

'Out,' shouted Peterson. 'Get away from here, both of you. Now.'

They rolled away. Farenden, hampered by his bad leg, struggled unsuccessfully to rise. Peterson grabbed one arm, Max grabbed the other, they hauled him to his feet and the three of them ran for the shelter of a small gully off to their left where they slithered down the slope in a hail of loose shale, small rocks and dust, finally coming to rest against a large rock, where they leaned, panting.

Behind them, a plume of dirty red dust rose into the air and hung threateningly.

'Well,' said Farenden cheerfully. 'A self-cleaning planet. No need

to worry too much about footprints.'

Maxwell had other priorities. 'My recorder ... Where is it?'

Captain Farenden hesitated for a moment and then held it out.

'Thanks, Charlie. I really didn't want to have to go back down there to retrieve it.'

'No chance of that. One or both of us would have knocked you on the head long before that could have happened.'

'I know, but I had to have it. Especially now the tube's caved in and the original has gone forever and it was so beautiful.'

'Yes, it was,' said Peterson gently. 'But there might be other examples waiting to be found.'

She nodded and sniffed. 'Sorry, but I'm just a bit ...'

'For God's sake, don't cry, Max. You can't blow your nose in a helmet and there'll be snot everywhere. Have some consideration for your colleagues.'

She nodded and automatically raised a hand to wipe her face. All that happened was that she left a long red smear across her visor.

He sighed. 'We really can't take you anywhere, can we?'

'Well, only to apologise afterwards,' said Farenden. 'So, to return to the point of this little expedition, where has our Mr Lewis got to, then?'

Pushing and pulling, they helped each out of the gully and stared around. Stubbornly, the landscape remained First Officer Lewis free.

'Where is everyone?' demanded Peterson, looking round. 'There's no one in sight anywhere. Are they still in the shelter? And if so, where's Lewis? Perhaps we should spread out and look for him.'

Maxwell peered around a rock. 'No time – shit – they're coming out.' And indeed, over in the distance at the radiation shelter, a hatch was being raised.

Peterson grabbed their arms and they were back in the gully again. 'They'll launch drones to look for him. We need to get back to the pod. We can't do any more here. This way.'

'We need to be careful,' whispered Maxwell, although why she whispered was a bit of a mystery. 'Remember they are actually looking for someone. It would be a bit of a disaster if they found us by mistake.'

'It's out of our hands now,' said Peterson. 'And it's definitely time to go home.'

'And so,' said Director Pinkerton to Commander Hay some time later, as they enjoyed a glass of something in her office, 'everything went off without a hitch and here we are, safe and sound.'

'You took your time reporting back to me.'

'That's because I'm not reporting back to you – I'm returning your

member of staff. As requested.’ She looked around. ‘He’s not here?’

‘He has made his report but I think he’s feeling a little under the weather and gone off to look for an aspirin.’ She fixed Director Pinkerton with a glare. ‘He hasn’t picked up some ghastly virus and brought it back, has he?’

‘Do you mean from Mars or St Mary’s?’

‘Either.’

She was indignant. ‘Of course not. Our decontamination procedures were rigorous and then he spent days in quarantine, along with the rest of us. He’s just a little ... tired and emotional.’

Commander Hay glared accusingly. ‘He wasn’t in that condition when I handed him over.’

‘Oh no – he was the very model of a proper Time Police officer when we took delivery of him, but there’s been a certain amount of improvement since then. I have to say he had a lovely time at the post-Mars party. He’s a talented boy, you know. You should get him to show you the trick with the lampshade and the Marmite sometime. It’s hilarious.’

‘I was expecting you back before this.’ Commander Hay paused, inviting comment.

‘Were you?’ said Director Pinkerton, politely, staring out of the window at the view. ‘There was no need to worry. Did you think we’d become stranded?’

‘It had crossed my mind,’ said Commander Hay, grimly. ‘Half of me was recoiling from the subsequent explanations that would have to be made and the other half was rejoicing in the knowledge that so many causes of such major grief would be safely marooned on Mars.’

‘I’m not quite sure how to respond to that.’

‘Then don’t.’

‘You’re very snippy today, Commander. I can assure you, everything went off without a hitch.’

‘Other than losing Mr Lewis, making the most ground-breaking discovery in the history of ground-breaking discoveries, and nearly losing the lives of three members of your team in a cave-in, of course.’

‘Yes, that’s what I said – without a hitch.’

It began to dawn on the commander that, like so many members of St Mary’s, Director Pinkerton heard only what she wanted to. She stared, again experiencing a moment of disquiet. An intangible something that danced just ahead of her ...

‘May I enquire as to the current location of Doctors Peterson and Maxwell?’

‘Still our guests. Until they recover from the post-Mars party as well. I suspect Dr Bairstow would have something to say if I returned

his people in less than pristine condition.'

'Actually, my concern was more for the whereabouts of Dr Maxwell's recorder.'

'Ah, yes,' said Director Pinkerton softly. 'The true reason for your anxiety over our return. You're going to try to force us to destroy the recording, aren't you?'

'I'm going to request you to do so, certainly.'

'And why would I do that?'

'You cannot release your findings without explaining how you came by them in the first place and I believe we've already covered the damage that would do to space exploration in particular and the world as a whole.'

'Very well. In a spirit of cooperation, we'll simply file it in the St Mary's archive – which is where it should be anyway – and wait for the right moment to release it.'

'Which will never come. None of this can ever be made public.'

'I doubt you'll get Maxwell or Peterson or anyone from St Mary's to agree to that.'

'Which is why I think the instruction will be better coming from you than from me, Director.'

'You're asking me to have it destroyed? I won't do it.'

'You cannot show it to the world.'

'I can and will. It's the only proof that there might, a very long time ago, have been life on Mars.'

'And how will you explain what you were doing on Mars in the first place?'

'Commander, no matter how hard you try, you can't put the genie back in the bottle.'

'No, but I can make sure the cork isn't removed from the bottle until the time is right.'

Director Pinkerton shook her head. 'I think we're past that now, Commander. Surely you must see that in the light of this discovery your reasons for suppressing my research no longer apply. I know I said we can't put the genie back in the bottle but I think the moment has arrived when the genie breaks the bottle and escapes for good. I don't want to toot my own trumpet, but this is possibly the most important find in all of recorded history.'

Commander Hay shook her head. 'This – none of this – will be made public.'

'Why ever not?'

'Are you insane?'

'Not according to my last medical.'

'Do you know what people would do with this knowledge?'

'Visit the stars? Colonise the planets? All without the need for

massive power sources or taking three generations to get there or depleting the planet's already scarce resources. Or they can take up the search for extraterrestrial life with renewed enthusiasm? Our findings will enable us to take a giant leap into the future. In ten years, we could be ...'

'If you make this technology public then it won't just be used for space travel. In ten years, people will be popping up in supposedly secure locations, killing and kidnapping and jumping away again in the blink of an eye. Entire armies will be transported across continents in seconds. Nowhere and no one will be safe. Thanks to you.'

'All I did was work out how to do it. I'm not responsible for what people do with that knowledge.'

'So said the people who invented guns, split the atom ...'

'Guns don't kill people. People kill people.'

'But if some idiot had never invented the gun in the first place ...'

'Then people would still be killing people, but with knives. Or sticks. Or rocks. Anything can be turned into a weapon. You might as well try to halt all scientific development now. People will always kill people. It's the one thing we do really well.'

Commander Hay re-seated herself and took a deep breath. 'You will surrender all information relating to this project to me. At once, please.'

'But the lives that can be saved in the meantime ...'

'Will that number be greater or lesser than the lives lost? Look, I know you equate the Time Police with book-burners, or Luddites or some narrow-minded, knowledge-suppressing religion, but we're not. We're truly not. It doesn't happen in your time, but I can tell you that the public discovery of time travel nearly killed us all. Old wars were refought all over again – we had a very interesting six months dismantling the Confederate States of America and restoring the Union. Thousands of people tried to kill Hitler. They still do. We've had to set up a department whose sole purpose is to protect him. Hitler, of all people. We had to throw a total exclusion zone around Jerusalem. And Bethlehem. And any number of people wanted Guy Fawkes to succeed.'

She paused and took a breath. 'So yes, you're right. Yours is a wonderful achievement. No one can ever take that away from you. You and your team will always be the first people to have journeyed to Mars. You will always be the first people to have seen the cave art. I'm sorry if you wanted fame and fortune ...'

'I didn't. I don't. I want to make this knowledge available to the world so we can have cheap, easy and safe travel to the stars. What's wrong with that?'

‘Perhaps one day. But not today.’ She held out her hand. ‘Please.’
‘Or what?’

Commander Hay said nothing, but not in a good way.

‘It’s a valid question, Commander. Or what? What will you do?
What can you do?’

Commander Hay stood up and looked out of the window at the darkening day. ‘I don’t want to, but I’ll hold you here. Forever. Under the powers vested in the Time Police, I’ll despatch a task force to St Mary’s and shut it down. I’ll remove and destroy every single piece of equipment and imprison your entire unit. Every one of your people will spend the rest of their life in isolation with no human contact of any kind. They will be utterly alone. Those from the other St Mary’s who accompanied you, Maxwell, Peterson, probably even Dr Bairstow himself, will sustain unfortunate but unsuspecting fatal accidents. Anyone with any knowledge of events concerning Mars will disappear forever. I will lock everything down tighter than ... well, anything you could imagine. And so, Director, I’m asking ... no, I’m not, I’m imploring you, I’m beseeching you, please surrender any and all material to me.’

There was a very, very long silence.

‘Director. Please.’

Still silence.

‘Director, I have an enormous respect for Dr Bairstow. And a great deal of regard for Maxwell and her accessories, before, during and after the fact, but your non-cooperation today will force me to despatch every clean-up squad I can muster. I won’t like doing it. It will cause me a great deal of pain. I may never have a proper night’s sleep again, but I am Marietta Hay and I command the Time Police, and our function is to safeguard the timeline by whatever means are necessary. So – please. Let the exploration of space proceed along the path allocated to it. Long, painful, hard-earned and because of that, valued as it should be.’

Director Pinkerton’s face was in shadow. ‘The discoveries we have made on Mars will fundamentally change the way mankind sees itself and its place in the universe.’

‘You are perfectly correct, but how will you explain this discovery? What were you doing on Mars? Can you not see how this overshadows the actual landing itself? Think of the questions that it throws up. Not least, is Mars ours to colonise? You spoke of the importance of ensuring the exploration of Mars continues, Director. I assure you, this discovery of yours could well stop it in its tracks. And, as you yourself have already said, there are plenty of people out there who will seize on any excuse to ensure it goes no further. As with the exploration of space, let the exploration of Mars take its true

course. For the sake of everyone. Not least, of everyone at St Mary's.'

More lights came on across London and the night bus sailed silently past.

'And it must come from you, Director. You alone have the authority to set this in hand.'

Director Pinkerton's mouth twisted bitterly. 'I thought the Time Police were equal to anything.'

'We are, but I prefer this to be settled quickly, quietly, and without bloodshed. St Mary's defying the Time Police is its default state, but not this time, Director. This is too important and I think you know that.'

The silence was a tangible thing, dragging on and on. Neither moved. Neither spoke. Commander Hay was just a dark shape against the window.

Eventually Director Pinkerton stirred and sighed. 'Very well – you win. There was nothing in the lava tube. There never was anything in the lava tube. And we were never there to see there was nothing in the lava tube.'

'And you'll order your people to remain silent?'

Director Pinkerton sat back in her seat and regarded the commander sardonically. 'What a good job you reminded me. My people are always racing off to the pub to regale everyone with tales of what they've been up to during their working day. I'm forever having to reprimand them about it.'

'I've offended you. Please accept my apologies.'

Director Pinkerton held out her glass again. 'Not the worst thing that's happened to me today.' She glanced thoughtfully at Commander Hay. 'Of course, all of this is quite unimportant beside the real issue of the day.'

Commander Hay, just beginning to relax, stiffened in her chair. 'Which is?'

'Well, those not in the know will speculate endlessly on how First Officer Lewis survived the solar flare. How he was found, unconscious but alive, some twenty yards from the shelter. As if he'd tried to get back before the flare hit but had failed. His oxygen should have run out. And yet he's still alive. That's going to keep the conspiracy theorists going for years, whereas the actual mystery is ...' She paused and raised her eyebrows.

'You mean – how did he get out of the lava tube by himself.'

Director Pinkerton grinned at her. 'Well, obviously, he wasn't by himself, was he?'

'You're saying he had help.'

'He must have, mustn't he? Something wanted him out of that tube. Something wanted us all out of that tube. And then made it

impossible for anyone ever to return.’

She held out her glass for another refill.

‘You seem remarkably ... unworried by this, Director.’

‘Well, obviously there was no hostile intent, was there? It would have been easy enough to bring the roof down on all of them and that would have been the end of everything and no one would ever have known. Lewis would have been presumed to have wandered off, got lost and died. Just an unfortunate accident. And no one would ever have known we were there at all. But the roof didn’t collapse until Maxwell, Farenden and Peterson were clear. Yes, they had a few nasty moments – just enough to get them harmlessly out of the way and make sure they never went back in, don’t you think?’

They sat in silence. A fleet of police drones flashed past, sirens wailing and blue lights flashing.

Commander Hay stirred. ‘This space travel must cease forthwith, Director. You must see that. You were lucky this time but the next time could be a horrible catastrophe. Just because a thing can be done does not mean it should be done.’

‘No harm has come of it so far.’

‘You haven’t been back that long.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I said that you haven’t been back from Mars that long – in your time, that is – so there hasn’t really been time for anything unfortunate to transpire.’

‘Oh, no. Sorry. Not that jump. Sorry. Didn’t mean to confuse you.’

The commander gripped her desk again and said very slowly and very distinctly. ‘There have been other jumps?’

‘Oh no. No. No.’

The commander relaxed very slightly.

‘Only one.’

The desk took another bashing.

They stared at each other and then, for Commander Hay, the tiny thing that had been niggling away at the back of her mind suddenly burst forth, alien-like, only with slightly more impact.

‘Oh my God – this time. You said, “this time”. When you were talking about getting Lewis back into the pod. You said, “We had the airlock sorted this time.” You’ve done this before, haven’t you?’

Director Pinkerton put down her glass. ‘Well, of course we have. It’s a long way to Mars. Anything could have gone wrong. We’re not complete idiots, you know. We thought a practice jump would be a good idea.’

The commander resisted the urge to bang her head on her desk but, for some reason, found herself more than happy to entertain the idea of banging Director Pinkerton’s. Quite hard.

‘I suspect I already know the answer to this one, but where and when?’

‘Our practice jump? Well, obviously we had to make sure everything worked properly. That the coordinates were correct and that the pod could withstand ...’

‘Where?’

‘... the lack of ...’

‘Where?’

‘What?’

‘Where? Where did you go?’

‘There’s no need to shout. The Sea of Tranquillity. July 20th 1969.’

Commander Hay paled. ‘Oh, dear God – it was you, wasn’t it? How could I not know it was you? You did it. You fluttered that bloody flag.’

‘Oh – that. Yes, I’m afraid we did. Sorry about that. We opened the door for a better view. The airlock malfunctioned and the escaping air fluttered their flag. We hoped no one would notice, but it would seem they did.’

Commander Hay groped for words. ‘You ... Do you realise that because of that, because the flag fluttered, even today substantial numbers of people are convinced the moon landings never took place? That the whole thing was a government conspiracy. Or a cover-up. Or simply to put one over on the Russians. The accusations of fakery ... the damage to the government’s reputation ...?’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that too much. You can’t damage a government’s reputation. They’re too busy doing that themselves.’

‘But ... but ...’

Director Pinkerton appeared to take pity. ‘No, it’s all right, Commander, don’t worry. That can’t ever happen again. That’s why we’ve set up an improved airlock system. It definitely won’t happen next time.’

‘There isn’t going to be a next time.’

Director Pinkerton favoured her with a sunny smile. ‘But there already was a next time. We went to Mars. I thought that was why I was here.’

The universe held its breath and then, for the second time that day, a dreadful scream of rage and frustration echoed through the corridors of power.

Those on the point of shutting down their equipment and departing for the day, suddenly experienced a strong desire to remain safely at their desks, at least until the shouting had stopped, and decided that, with personal appraisals next month, a little midnight oil, conspicuously burned, might not be such a bad idea after all.

In another part of the building, with two aspirin and two cups of

coffee inside him, Captain Farenden perceived the time had come to return to duty.

THE END

[illegible]
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Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to all Earthlets.

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